"The Next Last of the Breed": Dynastic Succession and Resistance in an Appalachian Storytelling Clan

By Joseph Sobol

Appalachian storyteller Ray Hicks was often described metonymically as "the last of his breed." After Ray's death in 2003, it emerged that several younger extended family members were capable of re-telling his stories. While space exists in the professional storytelling world for next-generation tellers to step into the family storytelling mantle, internal and external factors have resisted this development. The essay explores attitudes toward private and public performance, memory, identity, and honor among the descendants and relatives of a dominant Appalachian tradition-bearer.

When I entered graduate school in Folklore at Chapel Hill in the early 1980s, I announced my intention to concentrate on Storytelling within the curriculum. Right away my professors held Ray Hicks recordings under my nose like a dose of smelling salts: "Wake up, you poor pallid revivalist, welcome to reality!" Even via the tinny cassette deck speaker, that wondrous time-encrusted drawl reached in and rewired my listening brain. It sparked an immediate recognition of the fundamental orality of storytelling discourse, unbound to written text but braided with generations of familial voices incarnate within the teller. Rather than fitting his visualizations and inflections to a fixed and pre-existing text, Ray's voice was alight with propulsive narrative imagery around which he wove his improvisatory and formulaic language. It was a different order of experience from the memorized recitations of other prominent tellers in the storytelling revival; and as it had been for many before me, Ray's voice became the sound to follow in tracing my own storytelling path.

In my classes, I learned about the three main tradition-bearing families of Beech Mountain, North Carolina, where Ray still had his home: the Hicks, the Harmons, and the Wards, who settled the mountain together in the late 1700s and have intermarried ever since. The first Jack tales collected

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the fieldwork portion of this report is not the systematic field survey of social science methodology, but a tissue of relationships with a family and community tradition extending over a thirty-year span. I have written about Ray, his family, and the Jack tale tradition in a series of essays across that span (Sobol 1987; 1994a; 1994b; 1999; 2002; 2014). So this is an extension of that work into the track of an unknown future.

I report here on some field- and thought-work that is inconclusive, of necessity, because it is an account of a cultural work-in-progress, an unfinished story. It is also an examination of two pervasive linked motifs that are part of the emergent framing of that unfinished story: first, the motif of dynastic succession as it bears on a regional storytelling tradition, and, second, the motif of the last of a breed. I will show how the two motifs are posed as structural antagonists within the meta-narrative framework of the Appalachian wonder tale tradition (though the same dyad may occur in relation to other venerable and vulnerable folk traditions). What this story of the Appalachian Jack tale tradition in contemporary culture might look like without those two persistent, seemingly inescapable migratory motifs is a query that I would like to introduce without resolving, as I will reflect upon without resolving many, if any at all, of the narrative threads that this paper will engage.

A third idea must be considered as part of the pre-conscious foundation of the narrative, a cultural para-narrative frame. This is the notion of public persona, or the performing self. I will explore this through a few of the living exemplars, men and women of about my own age who are engaged publicly and privately with the regional tradition of Appalachian Jack tales as a repertoire for performance and as a familial legacy—and who, in doing so, have been forced to wrestle, consciously and unconsciously, with the psychological stresses of the public persona while attempting to answer or to resist the call of dynastic succession, to become (or to defer becoming) the next last of the breed.

It may seem incongruous to speak of dynastic succession in connection with a cycle of tales the hero of which is usually represented as an orphan, an outcast, or a deliberate refugee from all social hierarchies. But beneath the ideological surfaces of the American democratic experiment, dynastic thinking is deeply embedded in our collective modes of evaluation: witness our political marketing machinery, in which dynastic imagery exerts a massive hypnotic force. The paradoxes—or one might rather say psychic multi-valences—between the democratic surfaces of the tales themselves and the discursive frames of natural royalty and blood transmission that shape the presentation and consumption of the tales in performance reveal much about the atavistic appetites lurking beneath our conscious cultural mind-set.

iconization, and of mythic imagery in the Barthian sense—the utilization of a single potent image or class of images to capture and concentrate public contemplation in the service of an institution, in this case, the Festival as a contemporary storytelling sanctuary, and the elevation of the tiny town of Jonesborough to the imperial seat of the storytelling revival, the storytelling capital of the world.

In 1983, Ray and his cousin Stanley Hicks were awarded the coveted National Folk Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). When the notification came by mail to Ray's home on Beech Mountain, he threw the letter away, figuring that it was junk mail. It took visits from Stanley and a delegation from Washington to convince him that the offer was genuine. "I ain't never turned nobody down face-to-face," he claimed (Kinkead 1988, 37). The heritage fellowship is a cultural marker that mediates between the "natural resources" of traditional culture and the tourist/consumer system (Sobol 1999, 21). As national attention began flowing his way in the wake of that designation, Ray rarely left home to transmute his new status into accumulated capital—Jonesborough, some fifty miles from his home, was as far as he liked to travel. He turned down requests to go to Los Angeles to be on the Johnny Carson show and to New York for a televised colloquy with monologist Spalding Gray (Isbell 1996; Kinkead 1988). Yet with each gesture of resistance to iconization's gravitational pull, the magnetism of his folk celebrity grew. In a New Yorker profile from 1988, author Gwen Kinkead quotes NEA Folk Arts section chair Bess Lomax Hawes: "There isn't any other Ray and never has been another Ray, except perhaps back in the Middle Ages" (38). And biographer Robert Isbell (1996) wrote: "After they [Ray and Stanley] began to appear in the news media, people would come to their doors, as I had, to see these living relics, the last of a species all but gone from the earth" (31). With the aid of these and an accumulating weight of similar markers, all intertextually reinforcing one another, the last-of-the-breed theme was woven into Ray's public persona like threads into a cloak, invisible yet pleasurably or oppressively palpable, a mantle that subtly settled over him the moment he opened his famously welcoming front door.

The persona is practically a pre-conscious formation in most modern folk, members of the digital economy, who begin constructing these "second selves" the instant they click open a browser. The public persona is a distributable compound of images and artifacts that carry the individual's reputation along the mediated nervous system of culture. The persona accumulates power and prestige in proportion to its presence in these far-flung analog and digital domains that are no longer the province of the private person. Modern celebrity culture is entirely composed of these images and artifacts, promiscuously generated, pathologically magnified, and minutely quantifiable—as expressed by the notorious Q

called the Yarnspinners' Party, which charged a hefty separate fee for visitors to nosh kabobs and mingle with the featured tellers—a blessing that the explosive growth of the event had made ever more rare and precious. I was walking past the house where this event was taking place when I saw Ray sitting by himself on a stone wall by the driveway. He seemed dazed. "They said I was the most important storyteller in the country," he marveled. "Do you reckon that's true?" Temptations to the performer's ego that were easy to ignore when delivered via media, to which he paid little heed, were harder to screen out when toasted to his face by friends and familiars in Jonesborough; and Ray's perplexity mirrored every artist's moment of crucifixion—hoisted between the sudden elevation of the public persona and the deeply felt insignificance of the private self.

Robert Isbell's scrupulous and emotionally tactful biography of Ray, *The Last Chivaree*, published in 1996, contains germs of both of our root motifs. The last-of-a-breed frame is invoked metonymically in the title itself—wherein Ray's own singularity as a figure from another time is mirrored in the image of an ancient mountain wedding custom now faded to an ambivalent memory—as well as in the passage quoted above, posing Ray and Stanley as figures from a vanishing species. The dynastic succession motif appears late in the book, where Isbell paints a scene of Ray, some family members, and a group of visitors engaged in a round of storytelling. Ray's younger son, Ted, and his cousin Orville Hicks are present; Isbell (1996) comments:

> Obviously, Orville is Ray's anointed torchbearer, even though the shy son, Ted, knows all Ray's stories. But Ted will succeed his father only as a hardworking heir in the potato fields and in gathering herbs. His chosen mission seems to be taking care of his parents, not speaking before crowds. (161)

But Isbell had missed something, albeit something unnoticed by most outsiders. In an appreciation written after Ted's death early this year, I wrote:

> Ted was a shy, shaggy, red-bearded bear of a man who served as his father's ideal audience, chuckling in all the right places, reminding Ray of details and of stories that flowed out of the one just paused or completed. . . . He never competed with his father for the floor, but always seemed to relish the listening role and to appreciate the great good fortune of having these stories at the center of his world.
>
> Because of this division of imaginative labor, for the longest time no one I knew ever thought of Ted as a storyteller himself. There was an elegiac reflex, often found in the discourse around

and vocal resemblance to his father, began to shift the settled narrative of dynastic succession. It was as if each man had inherited contrasting patches of Ray's mantle—Orville's was woven primarily of broad, earthy comedy, and Ted's, of a soaring sense of wonder. Ted was invited to the National Storytelling Festival twice, not as a regular featured teller, but for special word-of-mouth appearances during the dinner hour, a low-pressure echo of the special status once given to his father's performances. Some influential forces in the storytelling world were gently putting Ted forward, hoping that the son would inherit the father's position on the highest platform of the national storytelling revival. There is an ancient legal and emotional logic at work here—the power of the father-son bond as ratified both in law and in myth.

But Ted's body wouldn't bear it. Diabetes, kidney failure, osteoporosis—all genetic susceptibilities—began to wear him away almost as soon as his father was gone. The revelation of his nascent storytelling talents and his rapid physical decline proceeded with terrible symmetry. He continued to tell his Jack tales joyfully, from his bed and his wheelchair in a Banner Elk nursing home until the night before he died, in the early morning of January 17, 2014.

Orville is still an active public performer, but he is having health issues as well and is starting to turn down storytelling engagements that require travel. It would be difficult not to interpret these fateful downturns as reflecting the fragile state of the family tradition in the current cultural environment. But in the popular iconic discourses around Jack tales and the Appalachian wonder tale tradition, last-of-the-breed may be less a literal descriptor than a mythic construct, a formulaic epithet and ceremonial office, like chairman of the board or king of rock n' roll. As soon as the current occupant of the office leaves the scene, the search for a next last of the breed automatically begins.

Ted's older brother Lenard knows all of his father's (and Ted's) stories as well and is fully capable of telling them when tactfully provoked. There is an account that has become ingrained into family legend that when Lenard was a grunt in the jungles of Vietnam, he told Jack tales to his platoon mates in their foxholes to pass the long close nights and help them forget about whatever all-too-actual horrors might be waiting in the darkness. But Lenard's relationship to the public role in the Hicks-Harmon dynastic narrative is complex. He took over the role of around-home son after Ted became incapacitated, and still spends weekdays at the home place since his brother and mother passed away. He does not seek the spotlight, the spotlight so far has not sought him, and in the traditional Hicks manner, that seems of little consequence to him—it may even be perversely gratifying. Then again, in keeping with Ray's own history and practice, the mantle of

of storytelling activities going on at the hotel for him to sample if he liked. And he replied, "I like storytelling. Do you know Ray Hicks?"

I was dumbfounded. Ray's public persona had traveled more widely than I'd suspected. "Sure I know Ray Hicks," I said. "He's one of my greatest teachers."

The man at the bar said, "He's my wife's first cousin" (Anonymous [3] 2012).

So it wasn't fame after all, but family. The man and his wife were here because their grandson was having surgery at a well-regarded local children's hospital. His wife had already gone to sleep, but the next day was the surgery and, after that, in the evening, he was sure that she would be happy to meet me.[2]

And so she was. The next night, down she came, smiling broadly, into the midst of the new breed of storytellers and not missing a lick. There was a brilliant moment where this woman who had never told a story publicly in her life was entertaining a cluster of nationally touring storytellers who were listening with their jaws agape as she told about Jack and the King who challenged him never to admit he was mad—a quite different version from the story called "Big Jack and Little Jack" in the Chase collection (1943).

"You should be out there on the circuit," one storyteller told her.

"Naw," she said. "I grew up down in South Carolina, never got up home much while I was a young'un. I know how the stories are supposed to sound but they just don't come out that way comin' outa my mouth. You should talk with my cousin. She's the real thing. She grew up right beside her grandma Buny, so she knows lots of things" (Anonymous [1] 2012).

So, later that summer, I went to their family reunion on the slopes of Beech Mountain and met this next Hicks cousin. But she was an embodiment of Lindahl's (2001) shy tradition. If she knew the stories (and apparently she does), she would not be tempted into exposing them too easily to the light of day. "The way we're taught," she said, "it's wrong to put ourselves forward, to try and grab glory for ourselves. We'd rather give the glory to God" (Anonymous [3] 2012). So we had a glorious covered-dish dinner on the grounds of the old home place, then sat around the picnic table and sang hymns for much of the afternoon. This is a deeply traditional Appalachian response to the spiritual challenges of worldly expression. Council Harmon himself was repeatedly "churched," or barred from the communion of the faithful, according to the oral tradition recorded by Chase, for singing, dancing, and telling tales. He would repent and be brought back into the fold, but "time anybody would start picking on a banjo he'd hit the floor. . . . But any time he took part in such goin's-on, somebody would tell it on him and the next Sunday the preacher'd get after him again" (Chase 1943, ix). If such internal struggle and external stricture was the lot of a faithful male elder, how much more fraught, even today,

If so, then the Jack tales may withdraw for a spell to the realm of Lindahl's (1994) shy tradition, a matrix of hearth and home performances that deflects the glare of iconization more resolutely than Ray was able to, given the twin pressures of the cultural moment and of his own peculiar genius. This generation may represent, if not the end of a breed, at least a fallow season in the folktale fields, while the family bides its time toward a renewal of the storytelling seed in a future generation that may again be able to follow the ancestral call. The question, then, that awaits a future generation of folklorists to research is just what will remain by that time of the special identity of place, clan, and culture that constitutes the wonder tale tradition of Beech Mountain—home place of the blood and the breed. For, as Ray himself summed it up at the conclusion of the film, *Fixin' to Tell about Jack*:

> Studyin' the Creation,
> of our life,
> if we could see it and understand it—
> it all means the same thing. . . .
>
> Now my body is a-standin' here,
> and it means just the same as that tree.
>
> Now my body is growin' off,
> aging,
> just like that tree.
> But a young seed then,
> as long as there's seed of it here,
> that's us . . .
>
> But when the seed of it's gone—hit's gone.
> (quoted in documentary by Appalshop 1974)

Notes

1. The storyteller persona is a problem discussed in detail in Ryan (2008). Referencing Celati (via West 2000) and Zipes (2001; 2002), he counter-poses the elevated status display inherent in the creation of a Storyteller Identity for public consumption with the non-hierarchical mutuality of community-based storytelling exchanges—the latter he calls "genuine storytelling" as opposed to its commercial simulacrum. While this is not the place to take on Ryan's dualistic position in all of its implications, I would point out that, in its fusion of folkloristic neo-romanticism and Marxian class analysis, he may be glossing over the pervasiveness of second self phenomena across all levels of cultural exchange.

2. Because this storyteller of the Hicks family line has so far avoided the cultivation of a public persona, it is appropriate to preserve her anonymity in this article.

References

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